

The Concept of Philanthropy in the Early Syrian Fathers

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Philanthropy implies love of humankind and the wish to improve the welfare of one's neighbor, often through charitable deeds or donations. The philanthropic mission therefore also implies relatedness, because it depends on a setting in which the needs of fellow beings are discerned and met. The understanding that philanthropy and communal existence are intimately linked is at the heart of this article.

Given the close association of philanthropic work and interrelatedness, a discussion of the former notion within the context of Oriental Christianity may, at first sight, appear a rather hopeless enterprise, especially if considering the more extreme manifestations of early Syrian ascetical practices, which are reported in historical sources. Passages from texts, such as Theodoret of Cyrrhus' *History of the Monks of Syria*,¹ Palladius' *Historia Lausiaca*,² or Sozomen's *Church History*,³ conjure up the image of Syrian ascetics living in remote, isolated areas, untouched by civilization: How could this lifestyle be reconciled with the philanthropic ideal? Can ascetics who are described as living off roots and wild fruits,⁴ wholly exposed to the elements and in harmony only with God and wild animals, be said to contribute to the well-being of their contemporaries?

In addition, the peculiar ascetical institution for which the Syrian Orient is renowned, the Stylite, envisions a holy person perched on top of a pillar, seemingly oblivious to human bonds and to the cares of fellow

¹ Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *A History of the Monks of Syria*, trans. R. M. Price (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1985).

² Palladius, *The Lausiaca History*, trans. Robert T. Meyer (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1965).

³ Sozomen, *The Ecclesiastical History*, trans. E. Walford (London: H. G. Bohn, 1855).

⁴ Sebastian Brock, *Syrian Perspectives on Late Antiquity* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1984), pp. 11-12; Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), pp. 332-334.

beings.⁵ How does the solitary virtuoso, who is said to have dominated the scene of late antique Syria, fit into a discussion on social welfare?⁶

The Syrian Orient was home to followers of dualistic teachings, most notably the teachings of Marcion, Mani, and Bar Daysan,⁷ and it is therefore not uncommon to encounter world-denying tendencies in early Syrian church writings. For instance, the *Acts of Thomas*, which were very much a product of this particular ascetical milieu, advocate a severe stance toward human embodiment, as well as worldly involvement, and, for this reason, enjoyed considerable popularity amongst dualistic thinkers. Writings such as the Acts of Thomas encouraged Christians to live as “strangers,” “foreigners,” or “passing travelers”⁸ in the world, thereby lending weight to the assumption that the Syrian ascetic was too isolated and eccentric a person to engage in philanthropic relief.

This understanding, however, is but one part of a larger, more complex picture. The present article wishes to provide a more nuanced reading of ascetical existence of early Syrian Christians. By considering a small number of writings produced by fourth-century ascetics (rather than by later historians), an attempt is made to discern the degree to which the existence of these ascetics was embedded within the local community and shaped by a loving concern for fellow beings.⁹

In the hope, then, of showing that the lifestyle of Syrian spiritual pilgrims was less secluded than some sources might suggest, an inquiry into the works of Aphrahat, the Persian Sage (died c. 345), and Ephrem of Nisibis (c. 306-373) is of interest. The writings of both theologians are notable for showing few traces of Greek thought forms and, hence, for

⁵ Sidney H. Griffith, “Asceticism in the Church of Syria: The Hermeneutics of Early Syrian Monasticism,” pp. 220-245, in *Asceticism*, ed. Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 220.

⁶ Brock (1984), p. 13.

⁷ Griffith (1995), p. 220.

⁸ Brock (1984), p. 9.

⁹ Within this context, it is helpful to note that five Syriac texts which were previously attributed to Ephrem and which describe the extreme and highly individualistic lives of Syrian ascetics have been shown to stem from a later period; see Griffith (1995), p. 222.

being genuine representatives of a Semitic Christianity, which was still largely un-Hellenized.¹⁰ They are also invaluable for revealing a native Syrian tradition of the consecrated life, which was in existence before the Egyptian-inspired form of monasticism began to spread into Syria toward the latter part of the fourth century.¹¹ This indigenous form of monasticism, also termed proto-monasticism,¹² was practiced by the *ihīdāyē*, or “single ones,” who dedicated themselves to the pursuit of divine intimacy through a life of celibacy and holiness. Aphrahat and Ephrem are believed to have been members of this ascetical tradition, and a brief preliminary discussion of its salient features helps to better understand the historical context that gave rise to the writings of these two early Christian theologians.

The term *ihīdāyā* has a variety of connotations and can mean “singular,” “individual,” “unique,” “single-minded,” “undivided in heart,” “single,” “celibate,” as well as “Only-Begotten.”¹³ At this point, it is important to establish that the Syriac term and its possible rendition as “single” and “celibate” does not imply a solitary lifestyle on the part of the person to whom the term refers. The *ihīdāyē* were neither grouped in separate communities in the style of Pachomian monasticism, nor did they live as semi-anchorites or hermits in remote parts of the countryside, away from towns.¹⁴ Instead, adherents of this ascetical tradition lived in small, informal groups in the midst of the larger Christian community.¹⁵ Most likely, the *ihīdāyē* were called by this name because they were

¹⁰ Sebastian Brock, *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and the Spiritual Life* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1987), p. xi.

¹¹ Brock (1987), p. xxi.

¹² Brock (1987), p. xxi.

¹³ Brock (1987), p. xxii.

¹⁴ Alexander Golitzin, “Dionysius Areopagita: A Christian Mystic?” Based on a lecture given by invitation of the Lumen Christi Society at the Faculty of Theology, University of Chicago, on February 19th, 1999, <http://www.marquette.edu/maqom/Lumxida.html>.

¹⁵ Brock (1987), p. xxi; Vincent L. Wimbush, ed., *Ascetic Behavior in Greco-Roman Antiquity: A Sourcebook* (Minneapolis, MI: Fortress Press, 1990), p. 7. Griffith suggests that celibates were free to choose their own living arrangements within the local community; see Griffith (1995), p. 237. Dempsey draws on Brock’s research and notes that some *ihīdāyē* lived in their parent’s home, while others lived a communal life in groups of two or three; see Deirdre Ann Dempsey, “The Phrase ‘Purity of Heart’ in Early Syriac Writings,” pp. 31-44, in *Purity of the Heart in Early Ascetic and Monastic Literature: Essays in Honor of Juana Raasch*, ed. Harriet Luckman and Linda Kulzer (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), p. 36, n. 22.

“single-minded” or “undivided in heart” in their devotion to the “Only-Begotten,” Christ, to whom they were betrothed at baptism.¹⁶

For the *ihīdāyē*, or the *bnay/bnāt qyāmā*, the “sons/daughters of the covenant” as they were also called, baptism marked a decisive moment in their religious existence. At this point, spiritual seekers clothed themselves in the heavenly *Īhīdāyā*, the divine Bridegroom, and committed to a life designed to reflect the purity of the angelic community.¹⁷ In this lifetime, Christ’s followers hoped to anticipate the splendor with which Adam had been endowed before the fall and which could be fully realized only at the resurrection.¹⁸ By dedicating themselves to God with a singleness of purpose, the *ihīdāyē* were incorporated into the unity of the body of Christ and acquired a new identity given “in the Spirit.” This new identity allowed them to share in the Lord’s divine sonship; it introduced the possibility of transcending the many limitations of earthly existence and of meeting fellow beings as equals.¹⁹ As Aphrahat writes in his sixth Demonstration, the earliest reference to the institution of the covenant, there were to be neither male and female (we note the Greek text has the *kai* copula, not an “or” here), neither bond nor free among the *bnay qyāmā*. All followers of the “Single One” were equal in the eyes of the Most High.²⁰

For the *ihīdāyē*, then, the ultimate goal was to emulate Christ in a spirit of equality and love. This attempt to replicate the heavenly

¹⁶ Elizabeth A. Clark, *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 32. See also Rebecca Krawiec, “Asceticism,” pp. 764-785, in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, ed. Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 770.

¹⁷ With the intention of anticipating the marriageless life of the angels on earth, the *ihīdāyē* dedicated themselves to the celibate life. Hence, married couples lived a life of continence. Brock notes that the term *ihīdāyā* normally included two categories of people, the *bthule*, “virgins,” both men and women, and the *qaddishe*, or married people who had renounced marital intercourse; see Sebastian Brock, *Hymns on Paradise* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1990), pp. 26-30.

¹⁸ Brock (1987), pp. xxi-xxv.

¹⁹ John D. Zizioulas, “The Early Christian Community,” pp. 23-43, in *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century*, ed. Bernard McGinn and John Meyendorff (New York: Crossroads, 1997), pp. 27-30.

²⁰ Aphrahat, *Demonstration* 6.6, in *NPNF* II.13, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1956), p. 367, cited in Griffith (1995), p. 225.

realm by overcoming the corruption and division of human life did not, however, imply that they were unavailable to the surrounding community and oblivious of its needs. On the contrary, the wish to attain angelic purity and Christ-like perfection propelled the *īhīdāyē* to engage ever more fully in the world, so as to alleviate suffering and advance peace. Their link to the community of the church was firm, and although adherents of this ascetical tradition were not usually members of the clergy, this occasionally could be the case.²¹ With this information on the institution of the *bnay qyāmā* in mind, it is now of interest to turn our attention to Aphrahat's *Demonstration on Prayer* and to examine the author's commitment to Christian philanthropy.

The Persian sage placed great emphasis on inwardness and silent prayer. In the opening paragraph of his fourth *Demonstration*, he writes that, "silence united to a mind that is sincere is better than the loud voice of someone crying out."²² Aphrahat urges members of his audience to raise their hearts upward, to lower their eyes downward, and to retreat into themselves the moment they start praying.²³ If the Lord taught his disciples to "enter the chamber and pray to your Father in secret" (Matt 6:6), what could he have meant other than that they withdraw into the heart and close the door, that is, the mouth?²⁴ Aphrahat invests silent prayer with such power as to suggest that it enabled Jacob to open the gate of heaven, Moses to behold the Shekinah of God and part the sea, and Hannah to conceive and bear Samuel.²⁵

Yet despite Aphrahat's emphasis on the withdrawal into the inner chamber of the heart and on the silent contemplation of God,

²¹ Griffith (1995), p. 223. Aphrahat seems to have been such an exception to the rule. Although little is known of his life, a surviving synodical letter written by the theologian to the bishops in Persia denouncing clerical abuses suggests that he held a high-ranking position in the Persian church and may have been a bishop. For more information on Aphrahat's life, see Robert Lavenant, "Aphraates," in *Encyclopedia of the Early Church*, 2 vols, ed. Angelo Di Berardino (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), vol. 1, p. 54; John A. McGuckin, *The Westminster Handbook to Origen* (Louisville, KE: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), v.s. "Aphrahat," p. 19.

²² Aphrahat, *Demonstration* 4.1, in Brock (1987), p. 5.

²³ Aphrahat, *Demonstration* 4.13, in Brock (1987), p. 17.

²⁴ Aphrahat, *Demonstration* 4.10, in Brock (1987), p. 14.

²⁵ Aphrahat, *Demonstration* 4.4-9, in Brock (1987), pp. 8-14

it is important to note that the theologian was equally committed to involvement in communal outreach. For him, prayer and the pursuit of purity of heart through charitable deeds were linked intimately. Aphrahat explores this link in the following lines:

First of all, it was through Abel's purity of heart that his offering was acceptable before God, while that of Cain was rejected. . . . And the fruits of Cain's heart later testified and showed that he was full of deceit, when he killed his brother: for what his mind had conceived, his hands brought to birth. But Abel's purity of heart constitutes his prayer.²⁶

The Persian sage equates prayer with forgiveness, with reconciliation, and with that which human hands bring to birth, (i.e., with deeds). An interior offering of prayer is acceptable to God if it is presented by individuals who are capable of forgiveness, have been reconciled to their neighbors, and engage in social welfare. Just as the fruits of Abel's compassionate heart constitute his prayer, our acts of goodwill constitute our prayer. Aphrahat does not distinguish between prayer and love in action:

Now it says in the prophet: *This is my rest; give rest to the tired* (Is 28:12). Therefore effect this 'rest' of God, o man, and you will have no need to say 'forgive me'. Give rest to the weary, visit the sick, make provision for the poor: this is indeed prayer, as I shall explain to you, my beloved. All the time that someone effects the 'rest' of God, that is prayer.²⁷

With these words, we arrive at the heart of Aphrahat's understanding of philanthropy. Philanthropy and prayer are inseparable. Giving rest to the weary, visiting the sick, and making provision for the poor is prayer par excellence. It is the quintessential means of acting in accordance with the divine will. Philanthropy allows humans to combat sin and to affect the "rest" of God:

²⁶ Aphrahat, *Demonstration* 4.2, in Brock (1987), p. 6.

²⁷ Aphrahat, *Demonstration* 4.14, in Brock (1987), p. 19.

Watch out, my beloved, lest, when some opportunity of ‘giving rest’ to the will of God meets you, you say ‘the time for prayer is at hand. I will pray and then act’. And while you are seeking to complete your prayer, that opportunity for ‘giving rest’ will escape from you: you will be incapacitated from doing the will and ‘rest’ of God, and it will be through your prayer that you will be guilty of sin. Rather, effect the ‘rest’ of God, and that will constitute prayer.²⁸

According to Aphrahat, then, all activities undertaken in the hope of “giving rest” to God by improving the welfare of fellow beings denote prayer. Prayer implies the continuous reaching out to neighbors. It can take place in the midst of worldly turmoil and in moments of seemingly great inconsequence. Aphrahat illustrates that prayer is most pleasing to God in precisely such moments:

Or again, suppose you go on a journey during the winter and you meet rain and snow and get exhausted from cold. If once again you run into a friend of yours at the time of prayer and he answers you in the same way, and you die of cold, what profit will his prayer have, seeing that he has not alleviated someone in trouble? For our Lord, in his description of the time of judgement when he separated out those who were to stand on his right and on his left, said to those on his right: “I was hungry and you gave me to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me to drink, I was sick and you visited me, I was a stranger and you welcomed me in” (Mt 25:35). He spoke in the same sort of way to those on his left, and because they had done none of these things, He sent them into torment, while those on the right He sent into the kingdom.²⁹

Given this understanding of prayer, it is not surprising that Aphrahat and fellow *ihīdāyē* chose to adopt a lifestyle that called for the striking of a balance between inwardness, contemplation, and silence, on the

²⁸ Aphrahat, *Demonstration* 4.14, in Brock (1987), p. 20.

²⁹ Aphrahat, *Demonstration* 4.15, in Brock (1987), pp. 20-21.

one hand, and communal outreach on the other hand. The Persian sage insisted that genuine prayer implied the readiness to please God through constant acts of mercy and kindness. Pure prayer described an attitude of love that was expressed in life and action rather than through specific religious practices.³⁰ For him, formal prayer was a means to an end. Although it was an essential feature of Christian existence and not to be disregarded,³¹ it was never the goal of ascetical strivings. The true goal of the Christian life was to discover the presence of divine love in oneself, in one another, and in the world at large; and to convey this love to members of the community. A vital means of doing so was to engage in the philanthropic mission.

The essentially relational nature of the early Syrian ascetical lifestyle and its philanthropic orientation is reflected also in the work of Ephrem. Although Ephrem did not expound on the importance of philanthropy within a specific context, such as prayer, a brief discussion of his writings supports the proposition that members of the covenant were invested in social welfare.

To begin with, Ephrem, a deacon and catechetical teacher of the church of Nisibis, was very likely an *ihīdāyā*. As seen earlier, this piece of information confirms that members of the covenant occasionally held pastoral offices and that Syrian proto-monasticism, unlike Egyptian monasticism, was essentially a village or urban phenomenon.³² The early native Syrian tradition of the consecrated life flourished in a setting in which the ability to imitate Christ by reaching out to fellow beings was at all times a given. Ephrem declared a deep commitment to philanthropic deeds in his *Hymns on Paradise*. In one of the hymns, he indicates that the true imitator of the heavenly *ihīdāyā*, the philanthropist, will be richly rewarded in paradise:

³⁰ Juana Raasch, "The Monastic Concept of Purity of Heart and Its Sources (IV)," *Studia Monastica* (1969): 272-282, cited in Dempsey (1999), pp. 37-38.

³¹ Hence, he writes: "I have written to you, my beloved, to the effect that a person should do the will of God, and that constitutes prayer. That is how prayer seems to me to excel. Nevertheless, just because I have said this to you, do not neglect prayer," *Demonstration* 4.16, in Brock (1987), p. 21.

³² Brock (1990), p. 26; Griffith (1995), p. 237.

Whoever has washed the feet of the saints
will himself be cleansed in that dew;
to the hand that has stretched out
to give to the poor
will the fruits of the trees
themselves stretch out;
the very footsteps of him
who visited the sick in their affliction
do the flowers make haste
to crown with blossoms,
jostling to see
which can be first to kiss his steps.³³

A further indication of Ephrem's philanthropic sentiment is provided in the *Nisibene Hymns*. In the seventh hymn, the theologian praises Bishop Abraham of Nisibis (361-363) for his single-minded devotion to the protection and welfare of his flock. It is notable that his flock seems to have included members of the covenant, a further indication that some formal ecclesiastical organization did indeed exist among the *bnay qyāmā*.³⁴

There is none that envies thy election,
for meek is thy headship;
there is none angered by thy rebuke,
for thy word sows peace;
there is none terrified by thy voice,
for pleasant is thy visitation;
there is none that groans against thy yoke,
for it labors instead of our neck,
and lightens the burden of our souls.³⁵

Like Abraham, who labored for his community by sowing peace,

³³ Ephrem, *Hymns on Paradise* 7.17, in Brock (1990), p. 125.

³⁴ Griffith (1995), p. 237.

³⁵ Ephrem, *Nisibene Hymns* 19.9, in Schaff and Wace (1956), p. 189.

nursing the sick, and caring for the poor, Ephrem sought to live the philanthropic ideal. His commitment to this ideal is best conveyed, perhaps, by his own actions. Emphatic that goodly deeds are more valuable than the hearing of ten thousand words,³⁶ the theologian heeded this maxim by engaging in charitable work; most notably he aided contemporaries during a famine, which struck Edessa toward the end of his life. An account of the event is presented in Palladius' *Lausiatic History*:

A dire famine weighed down on the town of Edessa, and in his compassion for the condition of the people who were wasting away and perishing, observing that those who were hoarding grain in their storehouses had no sense of pity, he [Ephrem] addressed them as follows: "How long will you fail to pay attention to God's compassion, allowing your wealth to be corrupted, to the condemnation and damnation of your own souls?" They decided among themselves to say to him, "We have no one we can trust with providing for those who are dying of starvation; for everyone is dishonest, and will act in an underhand way." Ephrem replied, "What opinion do you have of me?" for he had a great reputation with everyone, in a quite genuine and unfeigned way. They answered, "We know you are a man of God." "In that case," he said, "entrust me with the business; I will devote myself to becoming a hostel manager." Having received some money he began to shut off suitable areas in the streets, and saw to the provision of three hundred beds; some of these were to be used for burying those who had died; while other were for those who still had some hope of life to lie upon. Furthermore, he also had all those suffering from starvation in the villages brought in and given beds. He spent every day in constant attendance on them, seeing to their every need with great caring, making use of the means available to him. This he did joyfully, with the help of those whom he had asked to assist in the matter.³⁷

³⁶ Ephrem, *Nisibene Hymns* 18.9, in Schaff and Wace (1956), p. 188.

³⁷ Brock (1990), pp. 13-14. According to Brock, who provides a translation of this account, there is no reason to doubt the historicity of this narrative; see Brock (1990), p. 15.

Hopefully, the above discussion of Ephrem's views on philanthropy, although brief, has confirmed and strengthened the observation that the celibate life of the *ihīdāyē* was invested greatly in the welfare of fellow humans. Every *ihīdāyā* chose the means by which he or she could be of greatest benefit to the local community. Although the imitation of Christ and the attempt to anticipate the angelic life in the here and now demanded that the "single ones" become strangers to the world and its many distractions,³⁸ this prerequisite did not call for the physical withdrawal from village or city life. Aphrahat and Ephrem viewed involvement in the urban Christian community as invaluable to the cultivation of divine-human fellowship. Both early Syrian ascetics were convinced that the reaching out to neighbors in an accepting, loving, and generous manner foreshadowed the peace, equality, and love of the heavenly realm. By giving rest to their contemporaries, the *ihīdāyē* gave rest to God. They offered the purest of sacrifices and drew uniquely close to Deity.

A further ascetical work of the early Syrian church, which pays close attention to the notion of philanthropy, is the *Book of Steps*, or *Liber Graduum*.³⁹ The text is believed to have been written toward the late fourth or the early fifth century, most likely in the midst of a wider, secular community.⁴⁰ The latter feature is noteworthy, especially if one bears in mind that, by then, Egyptian monasticism and its emphasis on the physical withdrawal of spiritual pilgrims had begun to spread into Syria. Hence, the *Liber Graduum*, like the writings of Aphrahat and Ephrem, provides insight into the alleviation of suffering experienced, first and foremost, by humans living within an urban setting.⁴¹

Throughout the *Book of Steps*, the author pays close attention to the explication of two distinct paths of spiritual advancement, the path of the upright, whose followers practice the small commandments of

³⁸ See, for example, Aphrahat, *Demonstration* 6.1, in Schaff and Wace (1956), p. 362.

³⁹ *The Book of Steps: The Syriac Liber Graduum*, trans. Robert A. Kitchen and Martien F. G. Parmentier (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2004).

⁴⁰ Kitchen and Parmentier (2004), p. 1.

⁴¹ Kitchen and Parmentier (2004), p. lxxxii.

the Gospel, and the path of the perfect, which is pursued by Christians who abide by the great commandments and who embrace the complete renunciation of family, marriage, and property.⁴² The minor commandments are the milk, which is given to infants too weak to digest the major commandments of love and perfection, the solid food of the fully grown.⁴³ A closer look at these two expressions of Christian existence open up a better understanding of the prominence given therein to philanthropic relief.

As laid out by the author of this work, Christians who follow the small commandments devote themselves to the pursuit of active service. Until they have gained sufficient strength to enter the great road of the major commandments, which leads to the city of the saints,⁴⁴ they feed the poor, care for the needy, and make peace with their enemies. The upright “clothe the naked, just as our Lord said. They open the door to the strangers on a cold or hot day, and they have pity upon [other] people as upon themselves.”⁴⁵

The entire existence of the upright is dictated by social welfare and by the call to give liberally to everyone, not withholding possession, food, drink, or clothing.⁴⁶ Immersed in mundane, every-day existence, these Christians attempt to strike a balance between involvement in trade and commerce, on the one hand, and the quest for purification on the other hand. Christians pursuing this particular lifestyle take “one wife as is appropriate for Uprightness and for the ways of the world, treating well every person as they desire that everyone should treat them well, in as much as possible.”⁴⁷ Wealth is permissible, as long as it is used to benefit the greater good.⁴⁸

⁴² Brock (1989), p. 43.

⁴³ *Book of Steps* 19.35, in Kitchen and Parmentier (2004), p. 205.

⁴⁴ *Book of Steps* 19.35, in Kitchen and Parmentier (2004), p. 205.

⁴⁵ *Book of Steps* 13.3, in Kitchen and Parmentier (2004), p. 130.

⁴⁶ *Book of Steps* 13.4, in Kitchen and Parmentier (2004), p. 130.

⁴⁷ *Book of Steps* 13.5, in Kitchen and Parmentier (2004), p. 131.

⁴⁸ Kitchen and Parmentier (2004), p. xxxix.

Despite the nobility of this way of life, the author deems a person in pursuit of uprightness “inferior to the Perfect because he has not renounced the world and become sanctified and taken up his Cross, gazing upon heaven and understanding the truth that is the perfect Cross of our Lord.”⁴⁹ The perfect alone can hope to enter the heavenly church and to worship God in the company of the angels. Only they can be genuine imitators of Christ. Bearing in mind that the perfect commit to an existence of complete renunciation, one might wonder to how great a degree these Christians are able to pursue the philanthropic mission. Can social welfare hold a pride of place in the lives of spiritual pilgrims, who wander from place to place without permanent domicile and who depend on alms?⁵⁰

Although practical charity does indeed feature little in their existence, the perfect exemplify the philanthropic ideal. While poor and devoid of material means to promote the well being of their neighbors, they are of such purity and kindness of heart as to sow love, patience, and gentleness wherever they go. Indeed, the author refers to the perfect as “lambs among wolves,”⁵¹ who know no boundaries, no social statuses, no objects of avoidance. They are “disciples of love,”⁵² who enter distant cities without feeling shame at the profanity of urban life.⁵³ Filled with the Spirit, these holy men and women are like the angels whose spiritual prowess enables them to increase the welfare of contemporaries by teaching and by reconciling warring factions. Since the perfect have full knowledge of the Lord, “they are all things with all people and know how to instruct every person as it is helpful to him. . . . [B]ecause they travel to many places, [the perfect] speak to each one the word that is helpful to him and leave them for another place.”⁵⁴

⁴⁹ *Book of Steps* 7.2, in Kitchen and Parmentier (2004), p. 66.

⁵⁰ Kitchen and Parmentier (2004), p. li.

⁵¹ *Book of Steps* 19.30, in Kitchen and Parmentier (2004), p. 202.

⁵² In *Discourse* 30, the author suggests a distinction between the perfect and the disciples of love, the latter being on an intermediary level between uprightness and perfection. Yet as noted by Kitchen and Parmentier, the behavior of both sets of Christians seems barely distinguishable; Kitchen and Parmentier (2004), p. xlv.

⁵³ Brown (1988), p. 335.

⁵⁴ *Book of Steps* 19.31, in Kitchen and Parmentier (2004), p. 203.

Ascetics pursuing the path of perfection are guided by the ultimate commandment, the commandment of love:

Love loves all, which the apostle extolled more than all [other] good gifts. It is acquired by these major commandments, and that Perfection, which our Lord said is like the angels, is accomplished on this difficult and narrow road.⁵⁵

As indicated throughout the *Book of Steps*, the road of love and perfection is narrow. Few people can hope to traverse it. Yet although narrow, no one walks in isolation. The perfect are neither cloistered monks nor solitary hermits. They live the angelic life in the midst of the manifest church and its community of faith, with all of its shortcomings and conflicts.⁵⁶ Within this setting, they express their philanthropic sentiment by mediating disputes and by teaching the gospel of compassion. Following the model of Christ and his heavenly community, their greatest call is to possess unlimited love for their sin-ridden companions. The perfect wish to die so that sinners might live.⁵⁷

Regardless of their respective stages of spiritual advancement, then, members of this early Syrian community based their existence on philanthropic activity. Concern for their contemporaries provided the upright and the perfect, each according to their abilities, with the opportunity to imitate Christ and to deepen communion with God. The pursuit of social welfare, a pursuit closely tied to the urban church, was an essential means of catching a glimpse, in the here and now, of paradise restored.

The sentiments conveyed in the works of Aphrahat, Ephrem, and in the *Book of Steps* are remarkably consistent. None of the three authors could conceive of the quest for God without the church and its network of social relationships. The local parish provided the context in which

⁵⁵ *Book of Steps* 19.36, in Kitchen and Parmentier (2004), pp. 205-6.

⁵⁶ Kitchen and Parmentier (2004), p. 1.

⁵⁷ Kitchen and Parmentier (2004), p. xliii.

the suffering of fellow beings was alleviated. Here, the philanthropic mission was anchored. The love that early Syrian ascetics harbored for their contemporaries and, indeed, for the entire created order, was deep. If the world's beauty was marred and its people divided, this state of affairs could be rectified by taking the community of the angels as model and by committing to a life that emphasized interrelatedness and love in action. Neither Aphrahat, nor Ephrem, nor the author of the *Liber Graduum* ventured to propose that the pursuit of divine union called for the withdrawal from the local community and the curtailing of social outreach. All three theologians believed the urban philanthropic mission to be an invaluable means of being on the most intimate of terms with Deity. They were convinced that social welfare allowed Christians to do the will of God in the midst of worldly existence and to do so throughout the day, every day.

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